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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 07 BANGKOK 001348

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [KDEM](#) [TH](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE BURMESE EXILE  
COMMUNITY IN THAILAND

REF: A. 07 BANGKOK 5224

[1](#)B. 07 CHIANG MAI 179

[1](#)C. CHIANG MAI 63

[1](#)D. CHIANG MAI 10

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Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

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SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Thailand's Burmese exile community, based in Chiang Mai and Mae Sot, has undergone drastic changes in recent years. Younger members are taking on more grassroots endeavors aimed at addressing the immediate needs of Burmese inside Burma and Thailand. Several prominent exiles have broken away from traditional political advocacy work and now focus their energies on crafting grounded, thoughtful analysis of the current situation in Burma and new options to facilitate change. The result is that these new leaders often bump heads with long-standing opposition forces like Maung Maung and the National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB), whose two-plus decade efforts focus on international lobbying, fund-raising, and drafting position papers of questionable use, even as they lose touch with the reality of changing dynamics inside and outside Burma. At present, it is unclear whether the principal leaders of the exile community in Thailand can act as credible agents for change in Burma. End Summary.

12. (C) The Burmese exile community in Thailand is estimated to consist of more than 200 affiliated organizations. This cable provides an overview of the current dynamics of the Burmese exile community in Thailand, based on numerous conversations, meetings, and site visits made by political officers in Bangkok and Chiang Mai over the past several months.

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EARLY EXILES ADOPT AN UNCOMPROMISING STANCE  
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13. (C) Arriving in Thailand in the late 1980's, leaders of Burma's pro-democracy movement recognized that Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK) would remain the undisputed symbolic and visionary advocate for positive change in Burma. The exiles deferred to ASSK's leadership but sought to reinforce her efforts by vigorously raising international awareness of the Burmese regime's brutality. This was a useful strategy in the beginning, when the opposition's goal was to cast the Burmese junta as the worst violators of human rights and impediments to democracy. These politically focused, hard-nosed activists proved capable international lobbyists at raising awareness about Burma. Beginning with almost nothing, figures such as the current General Secretary of the National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB), Maung Maung, became particularly skillful at promoting themselves within the international community. The international attention they brought to the situation in Burma resulted in important diplomatic and financial support for those opposition members who remained inside Burma, as well as the ongoing efforts of those working in neighboring Thailand. More recently, these connections proved valuable during the September 2007

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protests because when the crisis broke, many of these figures used their long-established networks to pass information to key international decision makers.

14. (C) However, many exiles now believe that this antagonizing approach endured longer than it probably should have. Vahu Development Institute Director Zaw Oo's assessment is that the exiled opposition began to internalize the 'bad cop' role, transforming them from democracy promoters seeking change to vociferous Burmese regime opponents, whose position focused principally on casting the regime in the most negative light possible. The result is that many of their efforts today may conflict with the real purpose of those working for change inside Burma. Various members of the exile community we spoke with complained that Maung Maung and his close-knit champions spend an inordinate amount of time advocating hard-line views to punish the regime for its actions rather than engage in constructive discussions about how to move forward in bringing about change. Soe Thinn, currently a journalist trainer with Internews who used to work for Radio Free Asia and prior to that for the Burmese Foreign Ministry, said the NCUB and other exile groups had no sense of responsibility. "They (the NCUB and NCGUB) believe democracy is doing what we want," he said, and they do not understand that "they have to accept the majority," he added. Zaw Oo believed that "they (NCUB) suffer from mental fatigue at this point and many of their actions actually hurt the movement."

15. (C) Several people we spoke with pointed out that Burmese Senior General Than Shwe and his subordinates repeatedly use provocative rhetoric from activists abroad as evidence that the exiles pose a serious threat to the stability of Burma. Than Shwe frequently claims that the exile community is plotting the Burmese junta's overthrow with assistance from "certain Western powers." Unfortunately, this sets off a cyclical response from the hard-line exiles, who take the statements by the Burmese generals as confirmation that they must continue their uncompromising position and mobilize even further efforts to topple the regime using any means

necessary.

¶6. (C) The result, according to Zaw Oo, is absolute polarization of the issue. Any moderates that may exist within the Burmese regime or the opposition then face the difficult task of getting their point of view heard without it being overtaken by extremists in either camp. Debbie Stothard, Coordinator for Thailand-based ALTSEAN-Burma and a long-time Burma advocate, added that this back and forth ranting between the junta and the hard-line exiles amounted to little more than an endless stream of statements that never produced significant action. This polarization has also prevented the hard-line opposition from coming up with alternative approaches. More and more Burmese diaspora academics criticize the exiles' lack of vision about what a transition would look like and what would happen after a transition.

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WHO REPRESENTS THE EXILES TODAY?  
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¶7. (C) This circular finger pointing continues today. Long  
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time Burma advocate Chalida Tajaroensuk (formerly with Forum Asia and now Director of People Empowerment) blamed this failing on the lack of a clear leader within the Burmese exile community. "There is no Jose Ramos Horta like East Timor had," Chalida explained "and while the Burmese may have Aung San Suu Kyi inside Burma, there is no one outside the country who can provide a similar rallying point for the opposition." In the past, entities like the NCUB and the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) tried to organize various Burmese opposition members who fled to Thailand. But as Chalida and others pointed out, this self-styled elitist group of exiles never moved beyond its political and diplomatic circles; it never made much of an effort to engage in grassroots outreach efforts inside Burma or even Thailand. The NCUB and NCGUB's failure to organize any activities inside Burma to support "vote no" campaigns for the upcoming referendum exemplifies this limited reach.

¶8. (C) Stothard stated that Maung Maung and his cohorts took for granted that high level discussions would trickle down through the various levels of the organization and result in action. Instead, their secretive approach isolated those outside of their small circle and stunted the development of new leaders. Many Burmese exiles lamented that after almost twenty years of trying to lead an opposition movement, the NCUB and NCGUB continue with the same faces proffering the same ideas year after year. Soe Thinn of Internews described the stalemate of ideas as creating a situation where "activism has become a way of life;" the exiles have set up ever more organizations not because these reflect new approaches or increase coordination or impact, but principally in order to attract highly sought-after international donor support. Activism is also a means of funding their own personal sustenance, he added.

¶9. (C) While recognizing the important historical endeavors of the NCUB and NCGUB, Chulalongkorn University's Professor Pornpimol Trichote likened the exiles' situation to that of Burma's National League for Democracy 'uncles,' who have long held the torch for their country's democracy movement, but whose efforts in recent years have been criticized by many within the opposition movement as insufficient. She added that the dynamics of the Burmese exile community have changed, but that not all of its leaders have changed with the times. Leon de Riedmatten, former ICRC Chief in Burma and liaison between ASSK and the Burmese junta, recently stated to us that he is convinced Maung Maung and his colleagues do not grasp the reality of the current situation in Burma and therefore are not in a position to bring about change.

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CLOSE ENOUGH?  
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¶10. (C) Over the years, continual international lobbying efforts -- through the release of statements and papers, meetings with government officials, and various fundraising activities -- have resulted in these border organizations capturing the bulk of international community support for democracy in Burma, financially and emotionally. Recognizing the difficulties of operating programs and facilitating communication inside Burma, many members of the old school

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exile community have successfully made the Thai border area the nexus of the Burmese democracy movement, at least in terms of the destination for international funding. There are some exceptions, however. The Norwegian Government -- an ardent moral and financial supporter of the Burmese democracy movement for many years -- refuses to fund either the NCUB or its sister labor organization, the Federal Trade Union of Burma (FTUB).

¶11. (C) From their position on the Thai-Burma border, notes Human Rights Watch Burma consultant David Mathieson, organizations such as the NCUB claim close connections to groups and individuals working inside Burma. The exiles cite these connections as evidence of their ability to influence the situation in Burma. Donors facing challenges funneling money inside Burma turn to such exile groups as a logical alternative, recognizing that they are not ideal recipients but nevertheless provide a viable option. The danger, cites Mathieson, is that in order to justify long-term financial support from the donor community, many exile groups overstate their ability to connect with democracy activists inside Burma, particularly those working in urban areas. Despite these limitations, it appears to us that some resources from the Thai-based groups reaches Rangoon, as well as many areas along the border.

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REACH OF BORDER GROUPS LIMITED  
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¶12. (C) Exiles do appear to maintain varying levels of contact with Burma-based associates. The Open Society Institute's Liz Tydeman described meeting with activists in Thailand's Mae Sot in the midst of Burma's September 2007 protests. Repeatedly throughout their meeting, her contacts made and received multiple calls to activists in Rangoon and Tydeman overheard them discussing strategy, locations of colleagues, and exit options. However, as far as we can determine these contacts appear to be based on personal connections and do not translate into or reflect formal organizational ties, or a chain of command in the democracy movement.

¶13. (C) In early October 2007, the NCUB took credit for organizing the protests that occurred inside Burma the previous month, stating that the protests were a part of a long term strategy the NCUB had organized to put pressure on the Burmese regime (ref A). While many of our contacts agree that the NCUB helped place communication equipment in Burma that aided in alerting the world to and detailing the Burmese junta's violent crackdown of the protests, Embassy Rangoon's contacts repeatedly state that the protests were only loosely organized by scattered groups in and around Rangoon. In a November 2007 meeting with Chiang Mai Poloff, the Political Defiance Committee also claimed credit for the September 2007 uprising in Burma (ref B). When asked whom these groups work with inside Burma, Committee members are quick to respond "we have our network, but we will not give specifics." In the absence of at least some specifics, it is difficult to accept their statements at face value, particularly in light of the conflicting statements from activists working inside Burma.

¶14. (C) Democracy activists inside Burma recognize the value

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of the exile community's efforts to raise international awareness of Burma's political impasse, according to Embassy Rangoon. They especially appreciate the exile media, which broadcasts daily news into Burma. However, they do not see the exile organizations as a central component to Burma's pro-democracy movement, which is led by the activists inside, despite what some of the exiles claim. Since many of the exiles left 20 years ago, they have lost touch with the ever-changing dynamics inside Burma, both within the pro-democracy movement and Burmese society in general. This is the feeling of the overwhelming majority of Burmese whom Embassy Rangoon comes into contact with, including the NLD, 88 Generation, younger activists, community leaders, church-based leaders, and ordinary citizens. It was reinforced by the cool welcome the Thailand based-exiles gave those fleeing the September 2007 crackdown in Burma (ref C).

¶15. (C) One recent example of the disconnect between exiles and their Burma-based counterparts was NCUB's February 15 release of an alternative constitution for Burma (just days after the junta's announcement of the completion of the drafting of its constitution). The NCUB publicized its constitution as an inclusive document approved by a broad spectrum of civil society groups focused on Burma, including ethnic nationalities and women's organizations. However, when pressed by an international journalist, the NCUB conceded that the drafting and approval of the document had been completed by a relatively small group of Burmese living outside the country, who had no legitimate basis to claim it reflected the views of the 55 million Burmese living inside the country, or even the more than 1 million Burmese migrant workers and refugees living in Thailand. We have repeatedly been unable to extract from our exile contacts a reasonable explanation for their confidence that their views represent those of the Burmese people, much less a credible plan for action to turn their vision into reality.

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IMPACT ON ASEAN GOVERNMENTS  
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¶16. (C) The hard-line approach take by some exile groups has also contributed to the opposition movement's loss of credibility among ASEAN governments over time. Vehement, hard-line tactics tend to alienate ASEAN governments that generally adhere to foreign policies promoting consensus and non-intervention in the domestic affairs of their neighbors. The result is that many governments in the region are unwilling to work with the Burmese opposition and are uninterested in what these groups have to say. According to Asda Jayanama, a former Thai Ambassador to the UN, the Burmese junta has successfully pressed other ASEAN governments to distance themselves from the opposition, in part by playing on fear of instability in the region, citing the harsh rhetoric of Burmese exiles. An important exception to this disconnect is the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus (AIPMC), whose members (elected legislators from various ASEAN member countries) include many long-time Burma advocates. The AIPMC supports democratic change in Burma within their respective governments and has collaborated with the exile community in the past. Unfortunately, Thailand's AIPMC members -- currently opposition MPs Kraisaak Choonhaven (recently appointed president of AIPMC) and Alongkorn

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Polabutr -- have not been able to successfully move the Burma issue forward within the RTG.

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TARGETED, GRASSROOTS EFFORTS MORE EFFECTIVE  
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¶17. (C) While there may be growing skepticism among some members of the exile community about the value of international lobbying, efforts geared towards action on the ground are gaining momentum along the border. Many newer Burmese groups in Thailand employ a more grassroots approach that focuses on community development for Burmese on the border and those inside Burma. According to Zaw Oo, the best examples of this new area of activity in the Burmese exile community come from some of the women's and ethnic groups that have appeared in the past decade. (see Ref D for some detail on one such group) Soe Thinn described these groups as less fragmented than the exile groups that concentrate their efforts on purely political activities. At the same time, as these smaller organizations begin drawing greater recognition and funding from the international community, the NCUB and FTUB are seeking to co-opt their work. A representative from the International Republican Institute (IRI), repeating assertions from other donors, confirmed that IRI is encouraging its grantees "to stand up for themselves" and to resist NCUB and FTUB efforts to step in and direct their projects.

¶18. (C) Stothard emphasized that there are not strict ideological distractions or even animosity between those working inside and those outside Burma. Rather, she viewed the divide as much more nuanced, particularly at the grassroots level. Recognizing the differences, groups such as the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners Burma (AAPPB) and the Political Defiance Committee (PDC) emphasize the need to support groups inside Burma. In addition, many exile groups are recognizing the value of cultivating new leaders on the border as well as inside Burma and facilitating dialog with partners up and down the ladder. Unfortunately, as new leaders come across the border, the need for sponsorship from established groups -- to gain a degree of protection from the Thai authorities -- creates a dependence on those who are already established in Thailand, making it difficult for activists with more recent experience in Burma to present themselves as equals.

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COMMENT - THE WAY FORWARD?  
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¶19. (C) Many of the exile leaders from the NCUB and the NCGUB deserve credit for their early efforts to criticize the Burmese regime and engage in international lobbying. While this has played an important role in raising and maintaining international awareness about Burma, these hard-line activists have not moved beyond this role. As a result, they are losing credibility among their own community and ASEAN governments. Many opposition groups along the border have used the renewed attention and publicity about Burma to increase their funding and expand the influences of their various organizations, but their reach and effectiveness inside Burma only appears to be diminishing. Money and

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equipment supply lines to the activists, the most useful role played by the exile organizations, have been disrupted since September 2007, with only a trickle now getting through.

¶20. (C) It is not yet clear to us that the current leadership of the Burmese exile community in Thailand can establish itself as constructive and effective advocates of change in Burma. Positive steps would include balancing rhetorical attacks with concrete and practical proposals; adopting a more inclusive approach that provides a credible basis to claim they represent both a broad range of activists and perhaps even the large Burmese refugee and migrant community present in Thailand; and building or demonstrating a greater degree of coordination with and support for the pro-democracy movement inside Burma. At this time, the exiles' will and ability to accomplish these tasks remain unproven. End Comment.

121. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Rangoon and  
Consulate General Chiang Mai.

JOHN